

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 123 869

FL 006 638

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 TITLE Levels of Competence in Oral Communication. Working Papers on Bilingualism, No. 4.
 INSTITUTION Ontario Inst. for Studies in Education, Toronto. Bilingual Education Project.
 PUB DATE Oct 74
 NOTE 20p.; For related documents, see FL 006 681, FL 006 682, FL 006 683, FL 006 684 and FL 006 685.

EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.83 HC-\$1.67 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS *Bilingualism; *Communicative Competence (Languages); Comprehension; Language Ability; Language Development; *Language Learning Levels; Language Skills; *Linguistic Competence; *Linguistic Performance; *Oral Communication; Oral Expression; Rating Scales; Speech Skills

ABSTRACT

A set of levels of useful oral competence in a second language are proposed, and a revision in its structure is shown that can make it applicable to first language and to passive-bilingual situations. Unlike many other scales of bilingualism, it integrates oral expression and oral comprehension into a single scale without losing validity. Its distinctions are gross enough to be easily perceived and easily tested for, to be objective and reliable, and to be easily interpreted in terms of ordinary experience. In addition to developing this scale, several principles about language competence and its measurement are discussed: (1) Skills with the oral language and the written language are logically independent of each other, though they are correlated in many populations. (2) Although it is obvious that language competence is not a dichotomous property, it is also not a single continuum, as it has often been described. Oral competence includes at least two independent dimensions, comprehension and expression. (3) Levels of competence in oral expression and oral comprehension can be combined, however, based on their utility in communication. (4) Because of this interconnection, they can be interleaved together into a single scale of competence. (Author)

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Levels of Competence in Oral Communication

Th. R. Hofmann

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An objective & easily-used scale of oral competence is proposed for numerous practical applications. It interleaves communicative abilities in comprehension & expression to motivate 8 discrete levels.

The purpose of this note is to propose a set of rough levels of competence in oral language. This proposal is intended to be a practical tool, to answer the practical needs of, for example, job description or personnel selection.¹ But although I have not attempted to base this proposal on any theory or theories, it appears that it can also be justified on theoretical grounds. Moreover, it appears to be an adequate basis for classification of language requirements, language students, language courses, & bilinguals at large.

All studies of bilingualism & all requirements for competence in a 2nd language are hampered by the lack of an adequate standard for measuring a person's "degree of bilingualism". Given such a measuring device, there are still problems in deciding what level of competence is required to call a person adequately bilingual. But any such measuring device is made extremely difficult by the fact that there are 4 related but distinct language skills: listening, speaking, reading & writing.

Existing tests of language competence fail for several reasons. (a) Generally, only structures & lexicon which are

prescriptively or descriptively correct are tested. This procedure assumes that one cannot communicate without these "correct" structures. (b) Also, the so-called "passive" & "active" skills are often weighted & averaged together. This averaging assumes that a high ability in understanding compensates for a low ability in expression, or vice-versa. The proposed scale avoids both of these problems. Instead of averaging together the active & passive skills, it interleaves their levels in terms of utility in communication. And instead of testing structures, discrimination, lexical items, &c which native speakers use, it grades according to communicative ability.

The lack of an adequate standard of measurement can be solved in a rough way, & the problem of 4 distinct skills can be reduced by adoption of the scale proposed here. This 8-point scale is admittedly rough & impressionistic, but this is a strength as well as a weakness.

The strengths of this scale are 2-fold. 1st, as I shall show, a subject can be scaled against it simply from a 2- or 3-minute interview, or from memory if the subject is known to the evaluator. Nevertheless, it appears to be reliable & accurate on these bases. One can even scale himself fairly accurately against it. Moreover, I have discovered that this scale can be reliably used to scale a person in a language which the evaluator does not know well. Because the proposed levels are based on communicative behaviour, an evaluator can usually locate a subject in terms of this scale if he knows enough of the language

(& culture) to know when there is failure or difficulty in communication.

2nd, because it is easily interpreted in terms of ordinary experience & is moreover reliable, this scale serves as an excellent basis for the description of language competence. It is thus useful in discussion about & in specification of the level of bilingualism required for a person to function in a given job-title, or the level of bilinguals who exhibit a certain type of behaviour. It is also useful for describing one's own level of competence to a prospective employer, & for setting goals or specifying performance in language courses. It follows that this or a similar scale is needed to interpret the scores of a more elaborate competence test. Typically, elaborate tests yield scores which have no obvious connection to real-life abilities or requirements. Such a test is more useful if its scores can be related to the various levels proposed here. But most important, this scale is a solid basis against which to evaluate or validate more elaborate & detailed tests. As its gradings are usually obvious, a proposed test must not yield scores which conflict strongly with it.

To avoid the problem of deciding which of the 4 different language skills is most important, 2nd most important, &c, for a bilingual, this scale incorporates 2 important features. Since they realize important principles (both theoretical & observational), I shall discuss them here.

First, written language is not confused with spoken or oral language. For this discussion, I shall put aside the written

language.² An individual's competence in the written form of a language has no necessary relationship with his competence in its spoken form, even though there may be some statistical correlations between these competences for any given population. A scholar, for instance, may be able to read & even to write in a language without being able to speak it or understand it spoken. On the other hand, a bar-girl or a tailor may be able to converse in a language fluently without even being able to read it, although this latter combination of skills is unusual in a college-educated population. Indeed, this independence of spoken & written forms extends even to native speakers, whose ability to read & write bears no relation to their ability to speak & understand. All natives can speak or understand (by definition), yet there are wide differences in their ability to read &, especially, to write. Thus competence in the written language is independent of competence in the oral language. This is true of both foreign & native speakers.

2nd, the 2 oral skills, speaking & understanding, are conflated into a single "utility" scale. It is important to combine them, because only in this way can a person be scaled as having a certain overall level of competence, & not as having 1 competence for 1 skill, & an other for the other skill. This conflation may be justified from the communicative principle that understanding is a prerequisite to effective speaking. Alternatively, we may base ourselves on the observation that while there are many passive bilinguals (who understand but do not speak a 2nd language), there are no converses, people who

speaking a language but cannot understand it spoken. If such a person could exist, he would find his skill useless except for impressing people.

Communication by language involves an interchange of language, or at least the possibility of doing so. To be able to tell someone something without being able to understand his question about what you have told him, is nearly useless & puts the speaker on a par with a recorded message. If however, the addressee knows the speaker's language, he will question or reply in that language, & the speaker's so-called bilingual ability is worthless; communication is based squarely on the addressee's bilingualism. Because communication is based on the interchange of language, the effective use of the speaking & comprehension skills are inherently interrelated.

On the other hand, to be able to understand someone without being able to say anything, even to ask a question, is nearly as useless. Any communication that develops will be based on the other's bilingual abilities, except for the rare case where 2 "passive bilinguals" carry on a conversation, each in his own language. But even 4 years in the bilingual capital of a bilingual country has not given me the opportunity to observe such a case.

It no doubt occasionally results from classroom instruction that a student can produce utterances as well as or better than he can understand them. But by the argument above, this bilingualism is useless for anything other than starting conversations which either misfire or else switch into one's own

language.³ In effect then, this proposed scaling excludes aspects of speaking before understanding because that possibility, to the degree that it does exist, is useless in communication. Accordingly this scale should be called a scale of "Usable or Communicative Competence in Spoken Language".

Thus justified & named, it may now be set forth. To attain any given level, a person must be able to perform as described by the "definitions" of that & all lower levels. In general, however, functional performance on any level implies adequate performance on the lower levels.

<u>level</u>	<u>definition</u>
0	no useful ability in the language at all.
I	can use polite expressions, conversation openers, & simple 1-word expressions.
II	can understand slow, stilted (prosodically decomposed), or carefully spoken language, & make appropriate responses (in an other language or non-verbally). Subject can be made to understand, if speaker will take the trouble.
IIIP*	can understand ordinary conversation & make appropriate responses, non-verbally or in some language.
IV	can express his ideas so that they can be understood. Annoying mistakes, hesitation or rephrasings, but the message can get through. Subject can be understood if his addressee will take the trouble.
V	can understand major dialectal & social varieties, & can understand speech in spite of a noisy environment (e.g. typewriters, conversation).
VI	can express his thoughts without noticeable hindrance in the language. Minor mistakes or hesitations, perhaps, but communication is not seriously hindered.
VII	can pass for a native speaker ⁵ to an unskilled listener. No striking peculiarities in pronunciation, syntax or lexis. His usage is likely to be used as a model by others.

These levels are in order of increasing difficulty or achievement. A given subject at any level necessarily surpasses all lower levels. The particular definition of the levels can be argued, no doubt, until doomsday. I have chosen these particular ones because they are fairly obvious, at least to the non-expert.⁶ It is essential to understand that these are rough levels however. If we observe closely the behaviour of a particular learner, it is difficult to say precisely when he

achieves or passes any one of these levels. Sometime afterward nevertheless, it is easy to state confidently that he has attained that level. That is, while it is not possible to say reliably that a person is at 95% of level IV, it is a fairly easy task to determine reliably whether he is of level III, IV or VI.

To scale an interviewee, one begins by asking him a question about his surroundings or some current event. A clear & simple answer puts him at level VI, a belaboured answer classifies him at level IV or V. In either case, further conversation requiring simple & complex answers should be undertaken to correct placement mistakes based on the interviewee's personal preference for simple or complex answers. A tape recorder can be used to produce background noise, & to provide questions in other major dialects to ascertain achievement of level V. If however, the subject has given no coherent response to the initial question(s), he is asked to perform some action or to answer in his own language. Satisfactory response places him at level IIIP, but if the request must be repeated slowly & carefully, then an adequate response puts him at level II. Failing even that, the interviewee gets level I if he replied to & returned a greeting when entering; otherwise he is assigned level 0. Level VII requires further interaction, which should be done anyhow to verify the 1st placement.'

Bilingual job requirements seldom surpass level VI, or level IV if the employee need not express himself often. Level IIIP may be all that is required of a clerk in a bilingual milieu, or even merely level II for one who does a simple & non-critical job under supervision.

In order to take a university course, one must at least have a level IIIP competence in the language in which the lectures are given. Nevertheless, most students in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Ottawa reach the competence of level V in both French & English. Their attainment of levels IV & V probably results from a university student's need to communicate with other students, regardless of the others' competences & dialects. To give lectures in some language, one should have a competence of level VI, but a capable IV can do it. To subsist in a monolingual society, a level IIIA competence (see below) is the minimum required, but IV is strongly preferable.

Although the scale as proposed above is adequate (reliable & accurate), I claim, for the purposes it was designed for, there is a hidden problem lurking in its application. Many people (myself included) can pass the criterion for level IV in some language before they attain level IIIP. That is, they can (IV) express themselves (with difficulty) before they can (IIIP) understand conversational language. This suggests that the ordering is wrong, that IV should be placed before IIIP. Moreover, a good case can be made that native speakers can also generally perform at level IV before IIIP. In so far as bilingual competence is really competence in a single language, this also suggests that IV is before IIIP.

There would be several problems if we revised the ordering with IV before IIIP, however. (a) Passive bilinguals, having IIIP but not IV, would appear to have passed a step. (b) And, as argued above, attainment of level IV is not very useful unless IIIP has already been attained. The usual case in a bilingual

milieu (defined, say, as 50% of the population is competent to level VI in both languages) is that there is no use in trying to express oneself unless one has understood what is going on around him. Here IIIP is needed before IV is at all useful. The only case for expression being useful without easy comprehension is where one is in a milieu of monolingual speakers, as for example, a tourist, an immigrant, or a diplomat.

An other solution might be to coalesce levels IIIP & IV. However, (a) the step between II & a combined IIIP-IV would be big, too big to be useful in learner motivation or in sorting people by their competence. (b) Also, either of the skills IIIP or IV is sometimes useful. A better revision is:

REVISION OF SCALE

IIIA(ctive)	can express himself.	(= IV, above)
IIIP(assive)	easy comprehension.	(as above)
IV	both IIIA & IIIP	

With this revision, the scale can be used for native speaker competence by simply deleting level IIIP, which is attained with level IV. For use in grading employees in a bilingual milieu, the levels are ordered & presented as above, but tourists & immigrants are graded on the scale for native speakers: .. II, IIIA, IV, ... Individuals who are scaled without a specific purpose in mind should be rated IIIA or IIIP, if either applies.

Actually, bilingualism is only a label for being able to use 2 languages. A scale of bilingualism is essentially a scale for competence with a single language, the 2nd language. Hence any scale of bilingual competence should serve to measure competence in a natively-spoken language. The proposed scale does pass this

test, with a slight modification; interchanging levels IIIP & IV. With this interchange, it is more adequate for measuring 1st language competence, but loses some of its effectiveness as a measure of useful competence in a 2nd language. Both the method of learning & the relative usefulness of one's competences in a 2nd language are different from that for a 1st language. Thus the competence scale for a 1st language has this modification, & normal speakers proceed rapidly up this scale. Serious mental deficiency, however, prevents a person from surpassing a given level. Rough & impressionistic estimates of the ages at which normal children attain these levels, & the I.Q.'s that do not permit one to surpass these levels are given below.

	<u>normal age</u>	<u>IQ limit</u>
I	1.5 yr	
II	2.2 yr	50
IV	3 yr	70
IIIP	4 yr	
V	7 yr	80
VI	9 yr	
VII	12 yr	

These "normal" ages must be taken with a grain of salt, as the child is limited not only by his capacity with the language (& a 2-yr old has serious pronunciation limits), but also in the range of concepts (especially abstractions) he can manipulate. The latter is not relevant here, although it too may hinder communication. This diversion into correlations with native speaker competence levels has been given to provide the reader with better concepts of the levels. Such a correlation is logically necessary with any proposed bilingual scale, since it scales competence in a single language.

This scale is not, as no scale can be, an end-all; there are

other aspects of bilingualism. Range, for instance, is a different dimension. A person may be perfectly bilingual (by which I mean a level VI bilingual) in his office situation, yet be unable to function above level IIIP in a domestic or a social situation, due to differences in vocabulary, style, &c. Thus the range of environments in which the person has a given competence must be annotated in a complete description of his oral competence.

There is not a sharp division between "bilingual" & "non-bilingual", as is obvious to anyone in a bilingual milieu. Really, there are all sorts of in-betweens.* The ideal "balanced bilingual" who speaks 2 languages equally well is rather rare, while the other ideal "perfect bilingual" who speaks his 2nd language with "native speaker competence" probably does not exist. Nevertheless, there are multitudes of bilinguals, & they vary in ability. There is therefore a need for a scale such as is being proposed to enable one to discuss, to evaluate, & to interpret various levels of bilingualism.

Previous attempts to build a fine scale for degrees of bilingualism have failed for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the difficulty of assigning relative weights to expression & comprehension abilities. The present solution is not to weight these abilities, as 100% of one does not compensate for a lack of the other. But even if there were such a weighted scale which was reliable & incorporated a useful conflation of the different skills, it would nevertheless be difficult to interpret its scores in terms of experience or in terms of job descriptions because the number of degrees of bilingualism is too

great. For practical purposes, we need a simple & intuitively obvious scale such as the one proposed.

A 3rd problem is that most formal tests of language competence measure the subject's competence with the structures & vocabulary which are usual for a speaker of level VII. But level III competence can be attained without control of the fine points of the grammar of level VII. One can understand & speak understandably, for example, with very little attention paid to subjunctives, inversions or even plurals. That is, there is probably a poor correlation between the levels proposed here & competence with the structures peculiar to level VII. This implies that this scale will correlate poorly with some established tests, because it measures communicative competence rather than correctness.

In an applied situation where people & jobs are rated on degree of bilingualism, if the measure used is competence with level VII structures while what is important is the ability to communicate as measured on this or a similar scale, there will be people of differing abilities occupying similarly rated jobs. This will result in a continuous pressure to up-grade job ratings to level VII, just to insure that the person hired can communicate on level IV. Thus, the use of a test which measures competence with level VII structures leads to a waste of money & talent. A scale of communicative competence is clearly preferable in employment markets.

An other benefit of this sort of scale is that the language student can see his own progress. This visibility of progress is

a major motivating factor in language learning, & is usually absent. Eventually also, the goals of language courses may be defined in these terms. Well-defined standards lead to better teaching, & if language courses are described in these terms, we may expect improvement in language teaching. This latter is perhaps the most important benefit, & it will inevitably lead to the comparison of teaching methods for their efficiency.

The very existence of this scale has relevance to theoretical linguistics & psycholinguistics. Like bilingualism, competence with a language is not dichotomous either. On the contrary, by using the modification of the scale proposed above, competence can be broken down into a series of levels, the highest of which is not reached by a normal child until around 12 years of age. The common linguistic assumption that individuals are either competent in a language or not can be seen to be an idealization which restricts these theories to applications about mature speakers. The possibility of a scale such as the one proposed highlights the fact that this assumption prevents the valid application of linguistic theories to language learning or to incomplete bilingualism.

On the experimental side, one may well expect that studies & experiments on level VI bilinguals will have dissimilar results if replicated for level IV bilinguals or level VII bilinguals. More generally, an experiment on bilinguals of 1 level can show different results if repeated for subjects of an other level.⁹ Thus although this is a rough & impressionistic scale, it should be used in preference to describing an experiment as using "bilinguals".

To sum up, I have proposed a set of levels of useful oral competence in a 2nd language, & have shown how a revision in its structure makes it applicable to 1st language & to passive-bilingual situations. This scale is far superior to the usual binary division (bilingual or not) in matching a reality that includes considerable variation. Unlike many other scales of bilingualism, it integrates oral expression & oral comprehension into a single scale without losing validity. Moreover, it has the advantages that its distinctions are gross enough: to be easily perceived & easily tested for, to be objective & reliable, & to be easily interpreted in terms of ordinary experience. Its use in an employment market (civil service or private) promises a better utilization of talent for less cost, & eventually, a standardization & comparison of language courses. Over & above its promises, I have pointed out that a scale of bilingualism such as the one proposed can be applied directly in the following cases.

- 1) job description
- 2) employment application
- 3) interviewing applicants for jobs
- 4) language-student placement
- 5) motivating language-students by providing milestones
for measurement of progress
- 6) language course description
- 7) requirements for foreign students
- 8) description of bilingual subjects in
psycho- & socio-linguistic studies
- 9) interpretation of scores of complex bilingualism tests
- 10) validation of bilingualism tests

Besides proposing a scale of oral language competence, I have argued for several principles about language competence & its measurement. (1) Skills with the oral language & the written language are logically independent of each other, although they

are correlated in many populations. (2) Although it is obvious that language competence is not a dichotomous property, it is also not a single continuum, as it has often been described. Oral competence includes at least 2 independent dimensions, comprehension & expression. (3) Levels of competence in oral expression & oral comprehension can be combined, however, based on their utility in communication. (4) Because of this interconnection, they can be interleaved together into a single scale with discrete steps of about the size proposed here.

- - - N O T E S - - -

¹ It is only because of Canada's general thrust toward bilingualism that the general problem area is of great enough importance to motivate this proposal & the observations underlying it. Credit is due too to A-M. & C. Willis & to G. Neufeld who have grappled with these problems in general discussion. The thesis of M.J. Yamashita has also been important in showing that "native speaker competence" is neither defined nor definable by any objective standard. Thanks are due to B. Harris & Ph. Hauptman, in addition to the above-mentioned people, for their valuable comments on the expression & content of this discussion.

² A similar scale which interleaves expression & comprehension skills can be constructed for written language. Such levels might be tentatively sketched as:

- 1) can identify letters of alphabet & copy them.
- 2) can read titles, & specially structured information.
- 3) can read specially selected (or rewritten) text, can read ordinary text with aid of dictionary.
- 4) can write simple instructions & notes.
- 5) can read printed text easily (100 words/min or more).
- 6) can write informal letters or memoranda.
- 7) can write formal letters of request, application &c.
- 8) can write précis, abstracts
- 9) can write for publication

The North American average is about level (6), & illiterate has traditionally been understood as anything less than (3). (Note that traditional Chinese definition of literate is anything less than (8)).

³ Some theoreticians would argue, no doubt, that the ability to produce utterances may be useful for further training. If such is the case, an evaluation of the prospective student's specific abilities & potentials in a language classroom should include this possibility. The revision needed for this purpose is presented below.

* Below, this level IIIP will be distinguished from a level IIIA.

5 There is considerable doubt whether the ability to pass for a native speaker is relevant to this scale. Insofar as this ability entails having a consistent regional accent, it is relevant only to espionage or linguistics. Such an accent can be acquired, with careful training, even at level III or IV. One's accent, however, whether foreign or native, is irrelevant to communication.

This level VII is put here to serve as the high end of the scale, & to provide notation of a person's native language. A higher level could be considered, such as, "can participate actively in a lively group discussion among native speakers".

6 There are a number of terms in the definitions of this scale which defy scientific quantification or measurement, e.g. 'expression of thoughts', 'understanding' or even 'ordinary conversation'. They are none the less real, & a scale without them is sterile & useless, though "scientific".

7 All of this discussion is predicated of standard dialects; a note should be added about the effects of non-standard dialects. A competent (level IV or V) bilingual is often not familiar with non-standard dialects. Though he can express himself in the standard dialect, & be understood because non-standard speakers can understand the standard dialect, he may not be able to understand his interlocuter except with great difficulty. Thus, when judging his ability by observing his interactions with native speakers, care must be taken that the native speakers are from a standard dialect, or else the subject should be assigned the maximum level of any of his interactions. The latter procedure is probably necessary if the subject's competence is in a non-standard dialect.

It should be also noted that a person hired for a level IV job in a non-standard dialect area may be able to function only on a level II competence until he becomes familiar with the dialect. Either a level VI person should be hired or a period of adjustment must be allowed for the person to reach his competence level in the new dialect.

8 One of these in-betweens, an occasional product of totally bilingual environments & often the object of scorn, is the so-called "nulli-lingual" who speaks both languages with so much interference from the other that he is said to speak neither language adequately. The scorn is perhaps not so much deserved (except from "purists"), as he has a level of competence between IIIP & VI in both languages.

Such people are rather hard to classify in terms of which language is their native language. I suspect we would be better off not trying to classify people in that manner; it is irrelevant to most purposes. It tells us little that a particular bilingual is an anglophone & an other began from French, & it seriously misrepresents nulli-linguals. Rather, we may simply note a person's levels of competence with different languages.

9 For example, dissimilar results were obtained in an experiment 1st done by MacNamara & replicated by Neufeld, probably because bilinguals of different levels of competence were studied.